

Clenagh - History

Clenagh castle, a MacMahon castle in the Parish of Kilmaleery near Newmarket on Fergus, probably dates to the early seventeenth century as there are no historical documents before this time pertaining to the castle. The neighbourhood of Clenagh is mentioned in early documents during the Norman colonisation and we find that one Walter Fleming was granted lands in Clenagh in 1287 ⁽¹⁾.

The McMahons of Clenagh were descendants of the MacMahons of Clonderlaw in West Clare who in turn were descended from Mahon O'Brien, great-great-grandson of Brian Boru. Mahon's death was recorded in 1129 ⁽²⁾.

Also of interest in the history of Clenagh Castle is the account of the ancient harp of Brian Boru, now at Trinity Castle, Dublin. The harp was presented to the Pope by Brian Boru's son, Donough, with the regalia of Ireland, in about 1050 AD. Donough's death is recorded as occurring in Rome in 1064 ⁽³⁾. The harp was later sent to Henry VIII, who in turn presented it to Ulick de Burgh ⁽⁴⁾ who had been created 1st Earl of Clanrickard by Henry VIII at Greenwich in 1543 ⁽⁵⁾. On the marriage of Lady Eleanor de Burgh to Turlough MacMahon of Clenagh, the harp formed part of the dowry and hung in the halls of Clenagh Castle for about a century. It then passed by intermarriage to a MacNamara, whose son presented it, in 1782, to the Hon. William Conyngham, who deposited the harp in the Trinity College collection ⁽⁶⁾. It is known that the famous Máire Rua O'Brien, nee MacMahon of Clonderlaw, spent some time during her youth at Clenagh. Her older half sister, Áine, married Mahon MacMahon of Clenagh and they had a daughter, also called Áine, who was about the same age as Máire Rua. Áine and Máire Rua maintained a lifelong friendship ⁽⁷⁾ and so the legend that Máire Rua may have played on Brian Boru's harp at Clenagh Castle might have some truth.

Another important family associated with Clenagh, though perhaps not with the castle itself, were the O'Mulconroys. They had a famous school at Ardkyle, near Sixmilebridge, in the seventeenth century, and John O'Mulconroy is one of the signatories to the approbation of the Annals of the Four Masters in 1636 by Flan MacAoghainn ⁽⁸⁾. John's brother Iollan was known to have lived in the Clenagh area. He was an eminent scribe who transcribed Keating's "*Foras Feasa ar Éireann*" in 1643 ⁽⁹⁾.

It is unlikely that the castle was built before 1600 as it is not recorded in any of the early lists of castles in the county. In fact the first time it appears on any of these lists, was in the pictorial 1675 "*Edenvale Survey*", where it is represented as a standard towerhouse with a steeply pitched roof and having a surrounding bawn with a gatehouse ⁽¹⁰⁾.

For early documentary history the year 1611 is the earliest date in which reference is made to Clenagh Castle. In October of that year Turlough, son of Mortagh MacMahon of Clenagh, is named as one of the jurors in an inquest to administer the affairs of Turlough O'Brien who had died in 1584 ⁽¹¹⁾. By 1614 the castle and lands seem to have passed to his son Mortagh MacMahon. He is mentioned in a land conveyance dated August 3rd of that year ⁽¹²⁾.

In 1635 Donough MacMahon was the owner of Clenagh Castle. He was recorded as one of the owners of land which was sold to one Giles Bowden ⁽¹³⁾. In 1639 Turlough MacMahon of Clenagh, who was to play an important part in the administration of the county in the future, was one of the trustees appointed to the lands of Máire Rua MacMahon ⁽¹⁴⁾. Turlough was married to Áine MacMahon, Máire's niece. He was a supporter of Ormond during the 1650's and was again named at this time as a trustee of Máire Rua's estate ⁽¹⁵⁾.

During the 1641 Rebellion Turlough was made a captain of the forces for the preservation of the peace by Máire Rua's kinsman, Barnaby O'Brien, 6th Earl of Thomond ⁽¹⁶⁾, showing that Turlough opposed the rebellion ⁽¹⁷⁾. His son,

Turlough Óg, it appears, supported the rebellion and was one of the insurgents of Ballyalla Castle in the same year ⁽¹⁸⁾. After the rebellion the owner of Clenagh Castle appears as Mahone MacMahon. He forfeited the castle to Donough O'Brien and Teige MacMahon, son of the same Mahone. As Teige was a Catholic, and owner of Clenagh, he was obliged to employ his cousin, Donough O'Brien of Lemenagh, as his trustee ⁽¹⁹⁾, thus reversing the trusteeship which had pertained in the previous generation. Donough honourably restored Clenagh Castle to the MacMahons sometime before his death in 1717 ⁽²⁰⁾, when the effects of the rebellion had died down. Donough, later known as Sir Donat, was the son of Máire Rua. After the forfeiture of the castle post 1641, in common with other castles in the county, Clenagh was given over to an English transplantee. In this case we note that Sir Henry Ingoldsby was the occupant of Clenagh Castle in 1663 ⁽²¹⁾. His tenancy did not last too long for in 1700 the castle was again in the hands of the MacMahons. An interesting letter from Richard Wilson to Sir Donat O'Brien at Dromoland runs as follows: "*The old Lieutenant Donough McMortough MacMahon dyed on fryday last, and tho' he was minded in his obligations to you, yett he has by will left his cousin Daniel MacMahon heir to all his expectations; who thereupon brought him home and waked him at Clenagh, and buryed him at Killmaleeragh.....*" ⁽²²⁾.

The payment of taxes to the Established Church seemed to be a matter of contention for the MacMahons, but the same Richard Wilson, land agent to Donough O'Brien, was not one to give in, as can be seen in his letter to Dromoland in 1713. He remarks that "*Madame MacMahon of Clenagh is now, he hears, selling off her stock and moving*". He asks his agent to apply on his behalf to her or to her servants for the two years tithes which her husband owes him, "*and let not my long civil forbearance accation (occasion) the totall lose of the money.....if yu. cannot get payment in money yu. may take itt in any thing thats vendable*" ⁽²³⁾. The above mentioned "Madame MacMahon" was most likely Bridget, nee Barnwall, who married Donough MacMahon of Clenagh in 1697 ⁽²⁴⁾. Donough was forced to flee to the continent after being involved in Jacobite plots. He died in 1753, an old man and a colonel in the

service of Austria. It was said that the staircase of Clenagh Castle was broken down on his order “*so that no other man’s foot might tread it*”⁽²⁵⁾. The truth of this statement is not certain, although the staircase is actually broken, as the castle was lived in by his son Henry MacMahon who preserved the estate for his nephew Stanislaus⁽²⁶⁾.

In 1764 Marie Theresa MacMahon, sister of Stanislaus married Andrew Finnuane of Ennis⁽²⁷⁾. Stanislaus had died in 1757 leaving Clenagh Castle to his son the Abbé Donough MacMahon, who died without heir in 1784. He sold Clenagh before his death and the male line of the family became extinct⁽²⁸⁾. His sister Jane married into the Coppinger family of Barry’s Court⁽²⁹⁾, and her daughter Elizabeth married John O’Connell, brother of Daniel O’Connell, the Liberator. Elizabeth’s son, Morgan John O’Connell M.P. married Mary Anne daughter of Charles Bianconi of Longfield in 1865⁽³⁰⁾.

Some interesting headstones of the residents of Clenagh Castle can be seen in nearby Kilmaleery Churchyard, particularly those of some of the above mentioned, such as the gravestones of Bridget MacMahon, wife of Donough (The Colonel) who died in 1733, and Ann, wife of Henry MacMahon, who died in 1735.

References – Clenagh

- 1 J.R.S.A.I 1890 p292 and Frost p182
- 2 Frost p74 and p636
- 3 Memoir p544
- 4 White p157
- 5 Burke’s Peerage (London, 1846) P209
- 6 White p157
- 7 MacNeill p4

- 8 AFM Vol II pLXVIII
- 9 Molua, 1950 p25. See also, The Clare Champion, Nov 3rd 1989;
“Learned Families of Thomond” .
- 10 Edenvale Survey No. 19
- 11 I.M. No. 980
- 12 Ibid No. 989
- 13 Frost p329
- 14 McNeill p20
- 15 Ibid pp47/48
- 16 Ibid p25 and Frost p340
- 17 Sheedy p31
- 18 Frost p352
- 19 Ibid p412
- 20 White p314
- 21 Frost p412 Note 1
- 22 I.M. No. 175
- 23 Ibid No 373
- 24 Frost p75
- 25 R.W. Twigge
- 26 Frost p75
- 27 Weir p73
- 28 Frost p75 and p412
- 29 History of the Copingers (1884) p218
- 30 Frost p75